

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## FAITHLESS MAN, FAITHFUL GOD

Genesis 12:10-13:4

By

Steven J. Cole

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Genesis Lesson 27

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Genesis 12:10-13:4

One of the things I love about spring in the mountains is the call of the mountain chickadee. I have discovered that the chickadees here have a slightly different tune than the ones in California, although the other day as I was jogging in the woods near Buffalo Park, I heard one singing the California way! I first discovered the sound of the mountain chickadee the first few weeks I was a pastor. We had moved to the Southern California mountains in February, 1977. I was unsure of myself and of the whole idea of being in the pastorate. I had told the Lord that I would try it for two or three years and see where things were at. It was a big test of faith for me. It still is!

One beautiful day I was sitting outside reading some commentaries in preparation for my message when I heard the sound of the mountain chickadee. I had no idea what kind of bird would make that noise, but I expected it to be a large, or at least normal, sized bird. I followed the sound up to a tree and saw the tiny chickadee. It seemed incredible that such a tiny bird could make such a clear, loud call. As I stood there marveling at this wonderful creature, I thought of the Lord's words about the Heavenly Father's care for the little sparrow. It was as if the Lord was saying to me, "I take care of this little chickadee; I'll take care of you." So every spring when I hear the chickadee, I thank God for His faithfulness to me. Though I have faltered often in my faith, God has always been faithful.

I'm glad that the Bible is not a fairy tale, but a true-to-life book. If it were a fairy tale, we would read of heroes of the faith like Abraham, how they responded to God's call and never stumbled after that. They always trusted God, they never sinned, they overcame every hardship. But I couldn't relate to that, because that's not how my walk with God has gone. But thankfully, the Bible is written honestly, to show the faults even of the greats, like Abraham.

Abram came from a pagan background, but he responded to God's call. By faith he left his home in Ur and headed for Canaan. He got as far as Haran and stopped for a few years. Then the Lord called him again, and Abram moved out toward Canaan, not knowing exactly where he was going or what he would find when he got there. After he arrived, the Lord appeared to him and said, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7).

But Canaan wasn't a lush, uninhabited paradise, just waiting for Abram and his family to move in. The godless Canaanites were in the land (12:6). Also, there was a severe famine in the land (12:10), in *the promised land!* Abram had always lived in Ur and Haran, which are both on the banks of the Euphrates River. They never lacked for water. But now he sets out by faith to the land of promise, and the first thing he encounters is a severe famine. Can't you hear the critics in his household grumbling, "So this is the land of promise, huh? Nice, really nice! Are you sure God told you to come here, Abram?"

To survive, Abram journeyed down to Egypt. There was nothing wrong, per se, with going to Egypt. On at least two occasions God directed His people to Egypt for temporary protection (Gen. 46:3; Matt. 2:13). The text says that he went to "sojourn," not to settle, there. The problem was, there is no indication that Abram sought the Lord's guidance in this situation. It never seemed to occur to him that God was sovereign over the famine and that he needed to seek His direction. Abram built altars in Canaan, but there were no altars built in Egypt. Instead, we find him scheming about how to protect himself from the Egyptians who might kill him and take his wife. He falls into a desperate situation where Pharaoh takes Sarai into his harem. At this point, God's promise to make a great nation out of Abram and to give the land of Canaan to his descendants hangs by a thread, humanly speaking.

But shining through the whole story is God's faithfulness. Even though Abram was faithless, God was faithful. A recurring theme begins here and runs throughout Genesis, where God's promise to Abram (12:1-3) is threatened by someone's sin. But in every case, God overrules man's failure to bring about His sovereign purpose, to show us that God's promises and purpose do not depend on fickle man, but on the faithful God (see John Sailhamer,

*Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], 2:116). So the lesson of the story is:

When we are faithless, God remains faithful in order to restore us to faith and to fulfill His purpose.

In 12:10-16 we see Abram's faithlessness; in 12:17-20, God's faithfulness in delivering Abram and Sarai; and, in 13:1-4, Abram's restoration to faith in line with God's purpose. There are some obvious parallels between this incident in Abram's life and the nation Israel to whom Moses was writing. Both Abram and the nation Israel went down to Egypt because of a famine in the land (12:10; 47:13, 27). Abram feared that he, a man, would be killed and Sarai, a woman, would be spared (12:12); in Moses' day, Pharaoh ordered the male babies killed and the females spared (Exod. 1:22). God sent plagues on Pharaoh to deliver both Abram and Israel (12:17; Exod. 7:14-11:10). Abram received many possessions from the Egyptians (12:16); Israel took great spoil before the Exodus (Exod. 12:35-36). God delivered both Abram and the nation Israel, and they journeyed north toward the Negev (12:19, 13:1; Exod. 15, Num. 13:17, 22). (Alan Ross, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Victor Books, 1985], 2:49.)

Thus Moses put this incident here to show Israel that just as God had delivered Abram from Egypt in spite of his weakness, so He had delivered Israel in spite of her weakness. It didn't depend on their faith, but on God's faithfulness. Just as Abram returned to the land and called upon the name of the Lord, so must Israel obey God by taking the land and calling upon His name. We can apply it to ourselves by realizing that when we are faithless, God is still faithful (2 Tim. 2:13). Thus, we should be restored in our faith as we look to the faithfulness of God. Three lessons:

1. God's people are often faithless, especially during trials (12:10-16).

It is significant that Abram's deception concerning his wife started with a trial, the famine in the land. Whenever we face trials, we need to be on guard because the situation can either draw us closer to the Lord or turn us away. The words, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8), are written to

suffering Christians (1 Pet. 5:9, 10). When trials hit, the devil moves in to take advantage of the situation by trying to get us to turn from the Lord to our own schemes.

That was Abram's problem in this situation: He was relying on his own scheming, but he had not sought the Lord (see Isa. 31:1). If Abram had asked, the God who would later rain manna from heaven and bring water from a rock could have supplied his needs in the land during this famine. But he didn't bother to ask.

When you turn from the Lord to your own schemes of deliverance, you get yourself in deeper trouble, and you have to figure out even more schemes. Like turning on a road that angles off from the main road, the farther you go down the path of self-reliance, the farther you get from the Lord. As Abram got closer to Egypt, he realized that he could be in great danger because of Sarai. So he concocted a plan to pawn her off as his sister, not his wife (12:11-12).

Abram has been condemned as a coward, out to save his own skin, but unconcerned about Sarai's safety. But this is probably not fair. Abram's thinking was most likely that if the Egyptians thought Sarai was his sister, they would have to go through him to make marriage arrangements for her. Abram could stall for time, hopefully until the famine had subsided, and then head north again. Thus he wouldn't be murdered for his wife, and Sarai wouldn't be given in marriage. Besides, since Sarai was actually Abram's half-sister, the scheme was technically not a lie; Abram could salve his conscience.

But the scheme backfired when Pharaoh took an interest in Sarai. You don't stall or bargain when Pharaoh wants your sister in his harem. So Abram lost his wife for a while. There is no indication that Pharaoh violated Sarai. God protected her from adultery. But she was separated from Abram, living in Pharaoh's harem, awaiting the wedding day. The scheme nearly cost Abram his wife, and with her, the promised blessing of God to make Abram's descendants into a great nation.

Let me deal here with two tangential problems. First, some wonder how Sarai could have been so good looking, since she was 65 or older, and yet at 90 she was considered old (compare Gen.

17:17 with 12:4). The solution is that since the patriarchal life span was about twice ours (Abram lived to 175, Sarah to 127), Sarai here would be comparable to our thirties, and thus could still be considered beautiful by the Egyptians. By 90 she would be comparable to our late forties, thus past her childbearing years, although still attractive. In chapter 20, when Abimelech wants to marry Sarah, there is no mention of her beauty. He may have wanted her for the favorable alliance with the prosperous Abraham. I had to laugh when I read Keil and Delitzsch, a scholarly 19th century German commentary. They say how the Egyptians would probably find Sarai attractive because their wives, "according to both ancient and modern testimony, were generally ugly, and faded early" (*Commentary on the Old Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 197)!

The other problem concerns the matter of whether Sarai was right or wrong to submit to Abram's deceptive scheme. First Peter 3:1-6 mentions Sarah as an example of obedience to her husband in the context of saying that wives should submit even if their husbands are disobedient to the word. Some take this to refer to this incident and say that wives should submit even when their husbands want them to do something wrong, trusting God to protect or deliver them.

I believe that Scripture clearly establishes the husband as the head of the home. But the Bible also teaches that when a God-given authority in any sphere asks one under authority to violate the clear commandments of God, the person under authority must first tactfully appeal to the authority. If that fails, he or she must obey God, not men. So I think Sarai was wrong to go along with Abram in this deceptive scheme, even though God graciously protected her. Her lie on top of Abram's lie expanded the circle of involvement and almost led Pharaoh to commit adultery with her. Sin always snowballs like that. So, the wife or person under authority must stop the progression of sin when it comes down to her.

So Abram encountered a trial that led him to act on his own, without seeking God. This got him into another situation where he devised a lie in an attempt to protect himself. That got him into deeper trouble. But, take note, *it got him what he said he wanted!* In 12:13 he told Sarai to lie "so that it will go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you." In 12:16 we read that

it went well with Abram on account of Sarai. Pharaoh gave him livestock and servants (probably including Hagar, by the way) for Sarai's sake. But the hitch was, of course, that Pharaoh took his wife.

Do you think Abram was happy as he sat alone in his tent night after night? He could hear the bleating of the many sheep and goats, the lowing of the cattle, and the braying of the donkeys, evidence that it had gone very well with him on account of Sarai, just as he had wished. But while he got what he had wanted, there was an emptiness in Abram's heart as he sat wondering whether he would ever have Sarai back as his wife again.

But let's not just talk about Abram's faithlessness. Let's talk about our faithlessness as well. If you've known the Lord for any length of time, you have done the very same thing Abram did. It was easy to trust and obey God as long as things were going well for you. You thought, "Hey, this Christian life is great!" Then there was a famine in your land. Things weren't going quite the way you expected. You said, "Lord, what's going on here? Isn't this supposed to be the abundant life?" And you turned from God to the world or to your own ingenious schemes to fix the problems. You rationalized, "A man has to take care of himself, doesn't he?"

Maybe you had to tell a few half-truths to pull the right strings. You salved your conscience by telling yourself that you really hadn't lied. And besides, things were going pretty well now, since you started down this path. You got that raise, your business took off. Just look at your prosperity. You say things like, "I'm making more money than ever before. Isn't that an indication of God's blessing?" Or, "I feel really good about this new relationship. If it weren't God's will for me to marry this guy, wouldn't He stop me?" The world may treat you well, but if you peel away the veneer and catch you at a rare quiet moment alone, you'd have to admit that there is a leanness in your soul. That's where Abram was; we've all been there, too. Maybe you're there right now. Notice that the Lord isn't mentioned in this story until verse 17:

2. In spite of our failures, God is always faithful (12:17-20).

In the face of Abram's faithlessness, we see God's faithfulness. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny

Himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). Even though Abram's eyes were off the Lord, the Lord's eyes were never off Abram. God intervened by striking Pharaoh and his household with some sort of unspecified plagues. But somehow the Egyptians figured out that things started going badly from the moment Sarai took up residence in the harem. And somehow Pharaoh found out that Sarai was Abram's wife. Pharaoh's command to Abram to take his wife and go (12:19) echoes God's call to Abram to go forth from his country (12:1). God uses a pagan king's rebuke to get Abram back to the promised land to uphold His divine call. The incident shows God's faithfulness in spite of Abram's faithlessness.

It's always embarrassing for a believer to be rightly corrected by an unbeliever. It's tough to bear witness in those situations! Remember Jonah, fleeing from the Lord on the ship headed for Tarshish? When the storm arose, they cast lots to figure out whose fault it was. The lot fell on Jonah. They ask him about himself and he has to tell them that he's a Hebrew, who fears the Lord God who made the heaven and the sea and the dry land. And he tells them that he is fleeing from the presence of the Lord. Even though they're pagans, they answer, "How could you do this?" (Jonah 1:8-10). They could see Jonah's inconsistency. So here Pharaoh calls Abram to account and Abram doesn't say a word in reply. He just goes off with his tail between his legs, duly chastened.

If you as a Christian ever get rightly rebuked for your sin by an unbeliever, just confess your sin and seek the person's forgiveness and pray that God will give you or someone else an opportunity at another time for witness. But don't try to minimize or rationalize your sin and then proceed to witness for Christ. That's the worst thing you could do!

Verse 20 shows God's abundant grace in spite of our sin. Pharaoh commanded his men, and they escorted Abram, his wife, and all his belongings out of the country. That's grace: undeserved favor. If Abram had got what he deserved, Pharaoh would have killed him and kept Sarai and all his possessions. Or at least he would have kept his possessions and kicked Abram and Sarai out of the country with just the shirts on their backs. But God graciously blessed Abram through Pharaoh.



Don't ever mistake God's grace as a license to sin. God's grace ought to bind us in deeper devotion to our forgiving Father:

O to grace, how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee!  
(Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount")

God's grace never ought to be a reason for us to think, "I got off easy the last time, so I can do it again." If we do that, we are courting God's severe discipline (Gal. 6:7). In this case, God's faithfulness and grace led Abram to be restored:

3. God's faithfulness should lead us to repentance and restoration (13:1-4).

Abram headed back to Bethel (= "The House of God"), "to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, ... to the place of the altar, which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord" (13:3, 4). Last week we saw that two things marked Abram's life of obedient faith: the tent and the altar. The tent showed Abram to be a pilgrim, one just passing through on the way to another destination. The altar showed Abram to be a worshiper of the living God. The altar also bore witness to the godless Canaanites of the true God and of their own idolatrous ways. Abram left Egypt and came back to the tent and the altar. To call on the name of the Lord means to worship and trust God for who He is, the righteous and yet merciful Sovereign, who faithfully keeps His promises even when we are faithless.

What Abram did, we need to do when we have disobeyed God and strayed from His paths. We need to return to our beginning place with God, the cross. We bow there and remember the great price the Lord paid for our forgiveness. We call on His name, His attributes: His love, His holiness, His grace, His faithfulness. And we reestablish the communion we formerly enjoyed with Him. What the altar was to Abram, the Lord's Table is to be to us. We are invited there frequently, to confess our sins and appropriate God's forgiveness. If you are straying from the Lord, right now He invites you to come back to the cross and be restored to fellowship with Him.

## Conclusion

Thank God that when we're faithless and turn to our own schemes to escape trials, He remains faithful to restore us to faith in Him in order to fulfill His purpose! John Newton, the converted slave trader and drunkard, who became a faithful pastor and author of the hymn, "Amazing Grace," wrote another hymn which, sadly, is not as well-known. It shows God's faithfulness in bringing trials into our lives and our need to seek Him rather than turning to our own schemes:

I asked the Lord, that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and every grace;  
Might more of His salvation know,  
And seek more earnestly His face.

I hoped that in some favoured hour  
At once He'd answer my request,  
And by His love's constraining power  
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry powers of hell  
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed  
Intent to aggravate my woe;  
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,  
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

"Lord, why is this?" I trembling cried,  
"Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?"  
"'Tis in this way," the Lord replied,  
"I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ  
From self and pride to set thee free;  
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,  
That thou may'st seek thy all in me."

## Discussion Questions

1. Does God send trials or just allow them? Is the difference significant? Discuss.
2. Why are prosperity or good circumstances not necessarily signs of God's blessing?
3. When you're in a "famine," how can you determine whether you're in or out of God's will?
4. Was Sarah wrong to submit to Abraham in this situation? When are we justified in disobeying authority? How can we do it properly?

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